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CHILD LABOR FROM THE EMPLOYER'S POINT OF VIEW

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Enlightened self-interest is declared by orthodox economics to be the one central shrine at which every normal human being pays spontaneous worship and receives, in return, rewarding and stimulating inspiration. The Fetich there enthroned is incessantly invoked by the high priests presiding over its oracles, both when what they declare to be foolish and iniquitous attacks are devised on the inalienable privilege of the stronger to exploit the weaker, and also when with unctious emphasis counsel is dispensed to the ambitious with a view to luring them to earnest efforts. That at the goal of the race run in keeping with this god's pronouncementoes wonderful prizes are awaiting the successful while disobedience entails disaster, is the recurrent appeal and admonition of the school.

For the nonce, I shall range myself among the devotees of the dogma. I accept it blindly and upon faith. Whether its psychology be sound shall not constitute my solicitude. I concede that men are beasts of prey, with predatory instincts held in leash only by cold calculations of possible consequences that might prove costly and uncomfortable to themselves. I shall not even quibble whether the doctrine of enlightened egotism be intended merely as descriptive of the processes actually effective or be also meant as normative and regulative, as a law imbedded in the very nature and harmony of things. Such enquiry would lead too far afield into the domain of ethics, and the ethical aspect of the problem before us lies outside the immediate field of my observations. To economize time, I assume that the principle of enlightened self-interest wears the crown and wields the scepter in the modern counting-houses and factories. It is the Egeria reverentially consulted by keen-minded merchant and

alert manufacturer. The school has laid bare the motive of industrial and commercial ambition. Shall, under its recognized dominance, child labor be tolerated? Has the premature employment of children in mine and mill, in shop and on the stage, the credentials of approval by the school's own central criterion? Shall self-interest not prompt the employer of labor to close the door of foundry and factory against children?

Profit and loss, let us concede, are the final determinants of the soundness or the reverse of a commercial policy. Vulgarly phrased, men are not in business for their health. Is child labor profitable?

But little reflection will disclose that it is not. In the equation of modern industrial and commercial success, economy in time as well as in material is a dominant factor. Work to be profitable must be intense, and the degree of intensity must never be allowed to decline. This is due to the extent in which specialization has been carried out in the organizing of effort under the principle of division of labor. The colossal appetite of our steam-driven machinery must not be left unfed for the smallest particle of time. If it is, waste ensues, and waste spells loss. The investment represented by the steam engine, the consumption of fuel, the labor required for its care and supervision, depends for its profits upon the alertness with which the working force engaged upon production responds and maintains the tempo of activity. Boys and girls with undeveloped bodily frames are physically incapacitated from keeping up with the pace of productivity set as required by even the minimum of profitableness in the organization and machinery of a modern mill or mine. Their presence interferes with the speed and intensity of application on the part of adult laborers. Though nominally the wage account would seem when superficially examined to favor the employment of child labor on the score of its greater cheapness, when all the factors are considered the result bears an altogether different aspect. It is saving at the spigot and wasting at the bung. Coal, care of machinery, rent of structure, investment represented by the plant, cost of administration, insurance, and so forth, all enter into the computed cost of labor. The difference between the wage of the child and that paid an adult does by no means cover and balance the difference in profitableness between adult and child work. Grown persons by maintaining the required degree of intensity reduce the

proportionate expense in fuel, machinery, rent, administration, to a point where profit is probable. Child labor will not accomplish this. The original cost of child labor is always higher than that of adult labor. Enlightened self-interest advises the elimination of the child from factory and mine.

Mentally the child is incompetent to sustain the required tension of interest without which co-operative labor is rendered almost impossible. The child mind cannot be attentive as long as that of the adult. It easily wearies; it is under constant temptation of distraction. Play is the child's natural privilege. One cannot expel nature—as a well-known Latin adage has it. Forced out of one door, the child nature will re-enter by another. The child workers will play. To maintain discipline among them is a task of exceedingly great difficulty. Still, without discipline profitable co-operation in our highly specialized system of production or distribution is impossible. Cash boys and cash girls in our mammoth department stores are for this reason not merely a source of irritation to managers and patrons alike, they are also a source of avoidable loss. The work they do could be done much more efficiently, under greater freedom from vexatious delays and errors, by a force of adults not half as numerous and therefore doubly as economic.

Again, under child labor waste of material must be expected. Labor to be profitable must be intelligent. Intelligence will pay in the end, though the first purchase price may be higher than is that for stupidity and inexperience. The child cannot be expected to be as intelligent as the adult. It is not as careful of the tools, nor as cautious in the handling of the material. It allows much to go to waste which the adult laborer always saves and turns to good account. Wise employers have begun to realize these drawbacks inherent in child labor. The number of them that plead for the privilege of employing children on the ground of the profitability of their labor is becoming smaller every year where wise legislation has under compulsion demonstrated, as it always will, the reverse.

The opposition to restriction by the state now pretends or believes itself to be actuated by motives of social benevolence. Child labor, though not altogether profitable to the employer, is said to be advantageous to society, in as much as it enables many a family to keep together and in economic independence that otherwise would drift apart or, at all events, lapse into social dependency. That this

assumption is fallacious is not in great doubt. Child labor in competition with the labor of the parents necessarily tends to reduce the economic value of the latter. The family is not even economically profited by forcing the young prematurely into the mills and mines. If I dared venture into the moral bearings of this part of the subject, I should insist with good reason that nothing tends toward disrupting and undermining the family so perniciously as the premature economic independence of its immature members. Were even the economic fallacy not to be considered, according to which the wage of the father and mother is not affected by the labor of the child in competition with the parents this element of danger might indeed give the defenders of unrestricted liberty for exploiting child-life some pause. At all events there is one aspect that should appeal to the far-sighted enlightened employer. The employer is, or should be, a taxpayer. The tax rate is also a factor in the financial equation of his ventures. Present abuse of children, the denial to children of the opportunity to develop physically, mentally and morally, must affect the physical status and the mental and moral condition of the adults to-morrow.

Intemperance and crime make heavy drafts on the exchequer of organized society or government. But what is in most cases the producing microbe of intemperance? Is it not disordered nerves? Crime, again, has come to be known as depending upon physical conditions of body and mind. Exhaustion of childhood engenders disorder in young manhood and womanhood, which produces intemperance and all its consequent evils, and in many cases in parents the propensity to criminal and immoral indulgences. In consequence jails and insane asylums, houses of refuge for the fallen, penitentiaries must multiply. Their maintenance falls heavily on the taxpayer. This item in the ledger emphasizes the unprofitable character of child labor. Idleness in young years is not as prolific of immoral and criminal leanings as is premature employment. I have suggested the baneful effect on the nerves of the young. Who will dispute the equally pernicious influence on their morals by the surroundings in the factory or the department store? Who will deny that premature consciousness of earning capacity must foster a spirit of insubordination to parental authority? All these are elements that have made for the spread of moral contagion, which in turn is an item of expense in the budget of our municipalities and

counties, ultimately assessed on the employer. Let the young attend school, let the schools be centres of rational preparation for life, keep the youth of the land out of the mills, the mines, the shops, and you will keep them later out of the dance halls, the saloons, the brothels, the jails and the penitentiaries. Give us compulsory education in conjunction with restrictions on child labor, and child saving by means of police magistrates and reformatories will soon disappear. The adult drunkards and thieves and prostitutes will become fewer, and the tax rate decrease proportionately. Let us not forget that for the welfare of society, the promotion of greater reverence for parental authority and family affection is of prime importance. Yet the factory that lures the child away from home and school, and creates in its mind the impression of economic independence from parents by turning it into a bread-winner, cannot but exert an influence fatal to home affections and virtues, and as an unintentional, but effective, enemy of family ties open the floodgates to streams of corruption, menacing the health of the nation as well as the happiness of its fathers and mothers and sons and daughters. Patriotism which looks to the preservation of school and home always pays by reducing the expense account for police and penitentiaries.

And so does *justice* always pay, and therefore ought to appeal to enlightened egotism. Bitterness of social conflict and contrast is wasteful. Whatever promises to eliminate distrust and rankling sense of injustice from the relations of man to man, of employers and employees, has a financial value. It helps to increase profits. Social war and social armed truce are expensive. Abandonment of child labor cannot but make for increase of social peace. This bitterness, at all events, is removed which now must possess the child laborer's and his parents' hearts. The sons and daughters of the more fortunate classes attend school. They may play in the hours of relaxation. The children of the masses are deprived of the opportunity to become educated, to cultivate mind and soul; they are robbed of the golden smiles of innocent play and pastime. No wonder that they doubt that justice is inherent in the order of things; no wonder that they rebel against a fate which robs their children of childhood and thereby also of their full manhood and womanhood.

For that is the bitterest of all injustices that despoiled childhood invokes robbery of adolescence and virility, and strength and beauty,

the promises of later years. This is certainly not compensated for by the wage paid the child. Granted for argument's sake the employer pays the child for its present time and effort, in what way does he compensate it for the loss of its future health, happiness, vigor of body, mind and soul? He does not. He cannot. Thus he receives what he does not pay for. He is unjust. Of this injustice the laborer complains. Its toleration is one of the accusations which he lays against the prevailing social order. He feels that upon him is laid a burden which he should not carry. Laws against child labor will lift that burden. They will thus make for increase in confidence, for greater social goodwill. They will thus help to make economic labor profitable to both employer and employee.

Another consideration enlightened self-interest should lay near the mind of employers. Employers need "hands." Where are they to come from if children are prematurely exploited? The children of to-day ought to be the fathers and mothers of to-morrow. But they cannot be if they are devitalized in their childhood. And that is their fate where they are immolated on the altar of greed's Moloch. As yet immigration has not opened the eyes of many to this serious phase of the matter. But let Europe cease sending us its surplus or its scum, its energy and its misery, the short-sightedness of a policy which abuses the root and thus forestalls the growth of branches will become apparent at once. Our barren timber-robbed mountain crests monument a similar folly, but in a domain infinitely less determinative of human happiness and individual and national prosperity than that in which men and women are at stake. Deprive the children of to-day of to-morrow's strong manhood and womanhood and the employers will be deprived of strong men and women for to-morrow, and the day after. The sons and daughters of enfeebled men and women will be so stunted intellectually and so stunted physically as to be but poor substitutes for the sturdier men and women who worked yesterday.

We must have strong children to have strong men and women. I repeat, this aspect of the case is not so readily recognized in this country as perhaps it would be elsewhere. The kindness of foreign lands—among others, the Czar of Russia—contrives to send across the sea every year thousands of people to feed the Moloch in sweatshop, mill and mine. This readiness in foreign quarters to supply the American market with so many "hands" is greatly

to be deplored. I for one hope the day is not far distant when they will realize that it is better for them to keep at home both their Jewish and non-Christian "hands." We are facing a stupendous difficulty in the problem of immigration. But this vast stream of immigration of cheap labor will decrease—must be exhausted; and we shall then have to face the question: "Where will the men and women come from if we exhaust our children and despoil them of their divine right to future vigorous manhood and womanhood?"

As the speakers before me have quoted words of Him who certainly spoke truth out of the fullness of a loving heart, in accents that have but rarely failed to touch the souls of those who strive for right and justice, I may perhaps be pardoned in bringing my words to a close with a parable from His teachers, the rabbis of old.

In the Talmud we are told that when Moses was to receive the Law from God for his people, the Almighty demanded hostage. Moses offered first the patriarchs, saying: "We are descendants of Isaac and Abraham, are we not worthy of the Law Divine?" But the Almighty refused to receive from them hostage. Then Moses offered the prophets, saying: "We have certainly produced great men. Are we not worthy of the Law Divine?" But the Almighty rejected these, also, as insufficient security. Then Moses presented the children of his people, and thereupon God granted him the Law.

The sense of this parable is plain. No nation can live on its past. The crown of America is certainly studded with precious gems—the great deeds and the great valor of the generations that were, whose children we are. But the past is not sufficient. No nation can live on the past alone, nor on its illustrious patriots, though its great men are proofs of its vitality. And America has produced great men, men of great thoughts, of deep purposes, who sang and spoke in tones that might stir the world to its best. But the nation that has produced these great men certainly must not construe this production into a right now to forget its duty to humanity. The nation which loves children and allows its children to grow up as children should, with minds trained, souls purified, and bodies kept in vigor—children that are protected in their childhood—under their parents' authority and made to know what respect and obedience imply, that nation receives from God the Law of Life: that nation will endure.